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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL ECON EINT KPAO PK
SUBJECT: PAKISTAN AUTHORITIES BLOCK ACCESS TO "YOUTUBE"

1. (SBU) Summary: The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) has instructed Internet service providers to block access to the "YouTube" video-sharing Internet site. Service providers sent messages to subscribers informing them that the blockage is in effect until further notice because the site contains "blasphemous web content/movies." This may be a pre-emptive move ahead of the expected posting of clips from a Dutch-made film that negatively portrays Islam. Pakistani press speculates that the reason is closer to home - blocking videos of poll-rigging in the February 18 election or videos expressing opposition to President Musharraf. End summary.

¶2. (U) Internet service providers (ISPs) advised customers on February 23 that as of the previous day, PTA "has directed all ISPs of the country to block access to www.youtube.com web site for containing blasphemous web content/movies. The site would remain blocked till further orders from PTA." Rather than encouraging consumers to express their opinions to PTA, the notice from one ISP suggests that Internet users write to YouTube to request that they "remove the objectionable web content/movies because this removal would enable the authorities to order un-blocking of this web site."

¶3. (SBU) There has been a series of demonstrations in Pakistan against the recent re-publication of Danish cartoons considered blasphemous for their portrayal of the Prophet Muhammad, and Pakistani officials have summoned the Danish ambassador to complain about the cartoons. Government officials and news media are predicting an even stronger backlash against the upcoming release, expected in March, of Dutch politician Geert Wilders's short film that criticizes Islamic culture, tradition, and ideology.

¶4. (SBU) A February 25 editorial in "The News" speculates that PTA's target is domestic politics, not blasphemy. According to the editorial, YouTube users have posted videos that show poll-rigging during the February 18 parliamentary elections. The column notes that PTA has previously blocked websites of Baloch and Sindhi nationalist groups and blogs that criticize the Government of Pakistan. Media contacts and a telecom industry executive told emboff that the motivation for the order is even more specific and personal: anti-Musharraf content. YouTube contains thousands of clips referring to the president, many of them containing vulgar commentary and parodies of his leadership style.

¶5. (SBU) Comment: Following the shutdown of private television channels during and beyond the state of emergency, this move looks more like a heavy-handed attempt to block criticism of the government than an effort to protect Internet users from blasphemy. Although there is legitimate concern about what the public reaction will be upon release of the Dutch film, blocking access to it via YouTube is hardly likely to temper that reaction. End comment.

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